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# THE MORAL BASIS OF THE CLAIM

OF THE

# REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

## FOR OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

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A Speech Delivered by

## EAMON DE VALERA

at Worcester, Mass., February 6, 1920

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AMERICAN COMMISSION ON IRISH INDEPENDENCE
411 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

## BASES OF IRELAND'S CLAIM

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As most of you are probably aware, the primary object of my mission to your country is to secure official recognition for the elected government of the Republic of Ireland.

Our moral claim for recognition is based on these foundations:

1. That the people of every nation are entitled to the right of choosing for themselves the governmental institutions under which they shall live.

2. That Ireland is a nation and, as such, that *her* people have a right to determine for themselves *their* governmental institutions.

3. That the Irish people have, in fact, determined their government and have declared their will in an unmistakable manner. By their suffrages they have established an Independent Republic and chosen as their government this government on whose behalf, as its Chief Executive, I am here claiming formal official recognition.

Based, as our claim is, on these foundations—on principles that are universally accepted as very axioms, and on facts which can be so proven that there is no denying them—we have a right to expect that those who would reject our claim should give their reasons.

It is not on us the burden of proof should be put. It is rather those who would deny Ireland's right who should be called upon to give *their* arguments. That the Irish people are entitled to self determination, that the Irish Nation is entitled to its independence appears to us a self evident proposition.

## AMERICANISM

Why should I have to prove in any place where democracy is understood that the consent of the people governed is the one legitimate basis on which the government of nations can be founded? Why, above all, should I have to prove it here in the United States of America—time of all times—at the very moment when your nation's representatives—your Congress and your Executive—are considering the final act of a great and bloody war waged by America avowedly for this as one of the principles.

Were I addressing the citizens of some country where imperialism and not democracy is the rule of their national life, I would feel called upon to establish these foundations, perhaps. To dwell

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upon them here would seem almost an implied insult to you, for these foundations on which we rely could be denied by Americans only if they had forgotten all they gave assent to for the past four years, if they had forgotten their own Declaration of Independence and knew not that these principles are the very mainsprings of all your institutions.

To the European, Americanism means the embodiment of the principle of self determination of government by the consent of the governed, if it means anything. I shall take it, therefore, that these principles, as general principles, are granted here, and now I ask on what grounds can anyone deny application of them to Ireland.

## IRELAND A NATION

Ireland is a nation judged by every accepted general criterion of nationhood,* admittedly so even by the enemy statesmen of Britain —not two nations (as the present British Premier would like you to believe) but one nation,† with a unity and continuity of national life proceeding unbroken from the past, more ancient than any existing European nation except Greece, and with an intensity of national consciousness among its people corresponding to its antiquity. If nations in general are entitled to the right of national self determination, some good reason must be brought forward by those who deny that right to the nation of Ireland.

## WHY EXCLUDE IRELAND?

I ask everyone of you here to reflect for a moment and to ask yourselves if you know of any, even a single reason for the denial to Ireland of a right which you are willing to concede as in general the right of all nations. I have kept my ears and eyes open since I came to this country; I have been constantly on the watch for any argument which might seem to be a good argument for the exclusion of Ireland from the benefit of the general principle. I have noted many an attack on the Irish people and on Ireland's cause and I have failed to find any which could be called a good *argument* against Ireland's case.

Taking into account the assiduity of our opponents, I think their failure to discover a good argument might, in itself, be taken as fair proof that no such argument exists. When one has good arguments on one's side one does not usually reject them and rely, instead, on misstatements, misrepresentations, baseless assertions and abuse. I would like to know if anyone here can suggest a reason which seems to them good enough to justify the exclusion of the nation of Ireland from national self-determination—conceded now as a general right of all nations. I mean this as a genuine challenge and not as a mere rhetorical question.

* * * *

**Chesterton*
*†Asquith*

Is it that the Irish nation is not a nation at all? History, as I have said, and present day facts, which are there for everyone to investigate, are against those who would hold such a view. I am content to leave this to every fair-minded person to examine for himself or herself, confident that no objection can be raised to Ireland's claim on the ground of nationality.*

## HAS IRELAND SOLD HER BIRTHRIGHT?

Is it then that the Irish nation has sold its birthright and by some contract or other has put itself outside the pale of free national choice and national independence now. History has no record of any such transaction. Refusal to sell their birthright; refusal to allow their distinct national individuality to be annihilated or submerged has cost the people of Ireland seven hundred and fifty years of blood and agony.

Throughout the past it has been precisely this that has been the issue in the contest between Ireland and England—it is this that is the issue between Ireland and Britain today—that Ireland will *not* give up her own individuality as a nation and will *not* surrender her title to independence as a separate nation.

The British Government no doubt claims that Ireland has made such a surrender—that she is indissolubly bound in a partnership with Britain, but the Irish people have never admitted or accepted any such partnership; they have, on the contrary, repudiated and refused it and have fought constantly against it to the utmost of their power. Their record in this respect is in fact, in itself, ample evidence of the hollowness of Britain's claim.

England or Britain has never held Ireland except by force; never for a single moment has any English or British government dared to withdraw its troops from Ireland. As to-day they can only hold Ireland by howitzers and machine guns, by aeroplanes and tanks, by bombs and poison gas, so in the past, also, it was only by these same methods of brute force that they have been able to hold Ireland.

Which is this regime of force evidence of? Is it of voluntary partnership and legitimate contract? Is it evidence of an accepted political union? Or, is it not evidence, rather, of "the union of the shark with its prey?"†

## THE PLEA OF SECESSION

Those who would prejudice Ireland's case in the eyes of Americans talk of Ireland's "attempt at secession." There can be no secession where there has been no union; no divorce where there has been no marriage. England's act of "Union" enaced against the will of the Irish people by a body legally incompetent to enact it (a body that was not elected by the people—a body bribed to surrender what was not theirs to surrender), enacted

†*Byron*
**Chesterton*

too, only eighteen years after Britain's parliament had itself, by a solemn act of renunciation, abandoned its pretense to rule Ireland and recognized as "forever hereafter unquestioned and unquestionable" Ireland's sovereign parliamentary rights—this is the only basis that can be shown for England's so-called contract, this act which Gladstone said had originated in circumstances so "foul and vile" that it had "no moral title to existence whatever."

Eighty-six coercion acts, that practically deprived the Irish people of all civil liberty, show how England maintained this "voluntary Union" during the first eighty-seven years of its existence. In the eighty-seventh year of the so-called Union's existence, a further coercion act was passed and made perfect, a measure actively in force at this very moment, that gives to the British Government in Ireland powers over the individual Irishman and Irishwoman in excess of those it possessed in virtue of the war-time regulations, even an act that substitutes the arbitrary rule of Britain's military satraps for properly constituted civil authority, and deprives the Irish citizens of all the safeguards to individual rights that obtain among civilized people. It is thus that England maintains her so-called "Union" today and thus she has maintained it for the past thirty-two years. "Voluntary Union" indeed!

"Secession" indeed! "Divorce" indeed! It would be about as just to hurl these at a girl who was struggling to win her freedom from the brigand who had carried her off and was keeping her by force, as to hurl them at Ireland in her struggles for freedom from Britain.

## THE PLEA OF BRITAIN'S SECURITY.

You hear it sometimes said that England cannot let Ireland go—that Britain's own security demands that she should hold on to Ireland.

Now I am more than ready to admit that if the concession of Ireland's right conflicted with the equal right of another nation, that other nation would have a right to object until there had been a proper adjustment between the rival rights. But is it a question of an equal right in the case of Britain—is it a right at all—this so-called security of Britain?

Is it security England really wants, or is this not a word carefully chosen to deceive by giving the color of right to what is fundamentally not right at all, but narrow selfish interest?

It may be to my interest to deprive of his liberty a possible rival or competitor or even one whom a possible rival or competitor might in conceivable circumstances make use of against me—but surely it isn't my right. It is not my security, in the accepted sense of the word, that is in question here, but my dominance.

And so it is not England's legitimate security or safety that is in question in the case of Ireland, but rather England's dominance. And that England may continue to hold Ireland's markets as a commercial monopoly to profiteer upon, and that she may continue

to hold Irish harbors as a pirate's rendevous from which to issue forth on the adjacent trade routes and strangle any commercial or imperial rival she may have grown to dread—are these interests of England good and just reasons why Ireland should be deprived of the most fundamental of all a nation's rights—the right to be free? To me such a doctrine is so immoral that I cannot understand how any normal conscience can support it.

## WHERE WOULD THIS DOCTRINE LEAD TO?

I have frequently pointed out that, if once admitted, that plea would justify aggression everywhere, would destroy the fundamental equality of right between all nations and would subordinate the most sacred right of the small nation to the selfish interests of the great—and this simply because the great was powerful enough to make its interest prevail. On the basis of this so-called "security" Germany might have claimed to hold Belgium. France, might claim to hold it, particularly now, as she could point out that it was through the gate of Belgium she was attacked during the last war. Britain might claim to hold it on the basis that Antwerp is a pistol pointed at England's heart. On the same basis England might claim all the Channel ports. And so on around the world, every spot of earth might be grabbed up to make the world safe for empire—and no small nation would have any right to existence whatever.

To me England's attitude appears morally on all fours with that of a timorous tyrant who would secure his own domination by bastilling and guillotining every one who, under circumstances which he can conjure up, might prove either a source of danger to his person or to his power.

If this plea of England's be admitted now it is certainly a strange commentary on a war fought for the rights of small nations and it is an indication of how far mankind has yet to travel before even the elements of morality can find a place in the rules of international behavior.

## ENGLAND'S WAY OUT

On the other hand, if it were really her independence and her simple right to life as a national state that Britain wanted to safeguard, she could easily make provision for that without in any way infringing upon the equally sacred right of Ireland to its independence and to its life.

The United States by the Monroe Doctrine made provision for its security without depriving the Latin Republics of the South of their independence and their life. The United States safeguarded

itself from the possible use of the Island of Cuba as a base for an attack by a foreign power by stipulating:

> "That the Government of Cuba shall never enter into any treaty or other compact with any foreign power or powers which will impair or tend to impair the independence of Cuba, nor in any manner authorize or permit any foreign power or powers to obtain by colonization of for military or naval purposes or otherwise, lodgment in or control over any portion of said Island."

Why doesn't Britain do thus with Ireland as the United States did with Cuba?

Why doesn't Britain declare a Monroe doctrine for the two neighboring Islands? The people of Ireland so far from objecting, would cooperate with their whole soul in a regional understanding of that sort.

## PLEA DISHONEST

But there are even other ways in which Britain could safeguard itself if this plea were really an honest plea. An international instrument could easily be framed—as in the case of Belgium—an instrument that meant more for the safety of France, as the last war proved, than the actual possession of Belgian territory, especially if such possession were against the will and despite the protests of the Belgium people.

Again, the Peace Conference and the creation of a League of Nations gave England another opportunity, if England or Britain were minded to avail of it. In a genuine League of Nations the contracting parties could easily, by mutual compact, bind themselves to respect and defend the integrity and national independence of each other, and guarantee it by the strength of the whole. But England preferred—and prefers—a League of Empires—an Unholy Allance to crush liberty, not a Sacred Covenant to maintain liberty, even when such a covenant would secure her own independence forever.

No! It is not her national safety nor her legitimate security that England wants to safeguard. By any of the four methods indicated she could have made provision for these. What she wants to make provision for, I repeat, is the perpetuation of her domination of the seas by her control of the great Irish harbors. From these her ships of war can issue forth on the Atlantic, and in twenty-four hours can strangle the commerce of any trade rival she may wish to attack and completely cut the communications between the Old World and the New.

She wants this and she wants further, as I have said, the perpetuation of the present commercial monopoly through which she exploits Ireland today, as she exploited the colonies here until the cup overflowed in '76 and the exploitation was ended forever.

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## ENGLAND SAFER WITH IRELAI

England would have Americans believe that Britain's safety would be threatened by the presence of an independent Ireland on her flank. Well do England's statesmen know the contrary. Well they know that this England and Britain would be safer as regards their legitimate national rights than they have ever been since they first started on their campaigns of aggression against Ireland.

Human nature is human nature. Natural forces will produce their natural effects. If certain strong ones seem not to do so at times it is because there is some equally strong or stronger force interfering.

With a free Ireland, the preservation of its independence would be as strong a moving force as the recovery of that independence has been a moving force in every generation since the coming of the Norman.

An independent Ireland would see everything to lose in losing its independence—in passing under the yoke of any foreign power whatsoever. An independent Ireland would see its own independence in jeopardy the moment it saw the independence of Britain seriously threatened. Mutual self-interest would make the peoples of these two islands, if both independent, the closest possible allies in a moment of real national danger to either.

If they are not so to-day it is because Britain in her selfishness has robbed Ireland of every natural motive for such an alliance. The fish in the maw of one shark does not trouble about the possible advent of another shark. The mouse quivering in the jaws of the cat does not fear the approach of the terrier, but, if anything, welcomes it.

And so Ireland, deprived of its freedom by Britain—in Dependence, and persecuted because it is not satisfied to remain in Dependence—is impelled by every natural instinct and force to see hope in the downfall of Britain, and hope, not fear, in every attack upon Britain. Whereas, in an independent Island, the tendency would be all the other way.

Who is to blame—is it not England? Who can remedy this state? Is it not England? If the obvious remedy is not applied is it unreasonable to suppose that it is because the will to apply it is absent? And yet England pretends to be solicitous about her "security" simply. She affects to believe—and would have the world believe—that because a Dependent Ireland is hostile an Independent Ireland would necessarily also be hostile. She carefully hides that Ireland's present hostility is due solely to England's persistent aggression, and that when the aggression ceases, its effect—the hostility—will cease also.

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